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Customer service is the primary reason for centralizing and restructuring the Coast Guard's Mariner Licensing and Documentation Program

The Coast Guard's National Maritime Center is managing a project to centralize and restructure the Mariner Licensing and Documentation program. By centralizing the evaluation process, the Mariner will benefit in the following ways:

- **Decreasing processing time**

With 17 Regional Exam Centers (RECs), we have 17 different processes for issuing credentials. Once we have only one process to monitor and improve, it will be far easier to *substantially* decrease the time it takes to process an application.

Having all evaluation resources located and managed centrally allows us to quickly reallocate those resources in response to changing demand. In this way, we can greatly reduce in-process work to be ready for new work.

Recent information technology changes now enable NMC leadership to measure program-wide processing times by credential type to identify process inefficiencies in need of improvement. Several concurrent improvement projects are in-progress to address both short-term and long-term objectives.

- **Consistency of service**

Mariners readily know how customer service, processing time and interpretation of regulations vary from REC to REC. By centralizing evaluators, we can assure consistency while blending and maintaining our evaluator expertise through cross-training and both formal and informal knowledge sharing. Already, the entire program has seen a 19% improvement in consistency of processing time between 4Q2006 and 1Q2007 with overall times trending down.

- **Improved Customer Service**

Centralizing creates economies of scale and process consistencies that make possible the new 1-800-AskNMC Call Center and the capability for mariners to check the status of their credential application online via <http://homeport.uscg.mil/>. (From the home page, select Missions > Merchant Mariners > Merchant Mariner Application Status) Many more improvements are in the pipeline, too!

Some Improvement Projects Resulting from Your Feedback (status in parentheses):

1. WV processing time reductions (on-going)
2. NMC Help Desk (complete)
3. Simplified Application Forms and Packets (in-process)
4. Online application status tracking (complete)
5. Pay.gov (complete)
6. Fill-able PDF applications (final testing)
7. Online electronic applications (planning)
8. Publicly available performance metrics (in-process)
9. RECs as mariner advocates (in-process)
10. Bulk application processes designed specifically for academies, schools and industry groups (in-process)
11. Electronic records (planning)
12. Elimination of license creep (in-process)

Some Other Credentialing Improvement Projects (status in parentheses):

1. Passport style MMC (in-process)
2. Major MMLD improvements (in-process)
3. Merchant Mariner Medical Advisory Committee (in-process)
4. Improved consistency through centralized processing (in-process)
5. NMC now primarily focused on credential production (complete)
6. Establishment of NMC-1 to manage quality assurance and training processes (in-process)

Other important factors

USCG issued credentials will soon take the form of a passport. The increased security and complex equipment required to produce these credentials is prohibitively expensive to duplicate at 17 locations.

The new process

Mariners will use the existing RECs for face-to-face customer service. REC staff will help Mariners ensure their applications are ready for evaluation by the NMC. We have a new checklist for applicants that define exactly what is required for an application to be “ready for evaluation.” This checklist will be included in application packages to ensure mariners know what’s expected. The considerably-sized project to simplify the applications, application packets and supporting information is already underway.

Mariners will verify their identity, get fingerprinted and take their tests at RECs. When the TWIC is implemented, RECs will no longer be taking fingerprints. Once an application is accepted at an REC, it will be sent to the NMC either electronically or via courier. NMC will

evaluate all applications for Safety and Security, Medical Fitness and Professional Qualification. The NMC will communicate directly with the Mariner for the remainder of the process. Should a Mariner require testing or specific medical functional performance tests, he/she may be required to visit or contact an REC.

NMC will send issued credentials directly to Mariners.

Role of the future REC

RECs now spend most of their time evaluating applications. Centralization will result in minimal reductions in REC staff while removing the lion's share of evaluation work. RECs will then focus their efforts on other parts of the overall process important to the Mariner:

REC Activity	Benefit to the Mariner
Work face-to-face with applicants to ensure applications are "ready for evaluation"	Complicated regulations sometimes create questions that cannot be answered by a phone call
Provide examination services	Regional locations with people who are experts in testing means continued convenience
Monitor USCG approved courses	Confidence that course providers saying "USCG Approved" are doing what they promised
Evaluate local and specialty credential applications	USCG local knowledge is maintained

This also means the NMC can focus on the overall program and process to:

- Make it simpler and easier;
- Provide decisions and credentials as quickly as possible;
- Get it right the first time.

Direct and indirect calls for improving customer service, credential processing time and consistency of service have come from Mariners, Industry, Schools and Academies. We have heard these calls and are undertaking the tremendous task of solving these problems. Centralization is one component to making the solution reality.

The Coast Guard is committed to drastically improving all aspects of the credentialing process. We certainly understand past and current frustration and we accept that our past performance does not warrant giving us the benefit of the doubt just yet. With the past and present in mind, we continue to focus on the future and strive for issuing credentials to competent Mariners in the most efficient, customer centric manner possible.

We thank you for challenging us to improve; we ask for your patience as we do.

Sincerely,
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Please email comments, complaints and suggestions to iasknmc@uscg.mil